

The Huantajaya Silver Mine of Tarapaca, Chile:
Heritage Conservation. The silver rout in the central southern Andes
and the rescue of old mining identities and traditions of crafts in silver.

Ángel Cabeza Monteiro

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and the rescue of old mining identities
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Abstract

This article presents the first stage of a research and intervention project related to the old prehispanic and colonial silver mine located in the Desert of Tarapacá, Chile, and how the local communities are working to rescue the heritage values of this site and recovering the symbolic importance for the history of the region and its population. In the silver mine of Huantajaya settled many thousand people from different origins in extremely hard conditions, who developed an essential part of the cultural identity of Tarapacá, that was the basis of the salt peter or nitrate mining industry of XIX century that make famous the region in the world. Nowadays the mining town disappeared and only exist some archaeological remains, mine shafts excavated in the hills and the memories of its past as a legend, together with many archives forgotten in Spain, Perú, Bolivia and Chile. Despite the above, some of the local population want to put in value this heritage and rescue some of its traditions to enrich their cultural identity.

Key words: Mining heritage; Chile; Communities participation; Silver craftsmen; Religious beliefs.



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La Mina de Plata Huantajaya de Tarapacá, Chile: La Ruta de la Plata en los Andes Centrales del Sur y el Rescate de las Antiguas Identidades Mineras y Tradiciones Artesanales en Plata.

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Resumen

Este artículo presenta la primera etapa de un proyecto de investigación e intervención relacionado con Huantajaya, una antigua mina de plata prehispánica y colonial ubicada en el Desierto de Tarapacá, Chile; y cómo las comunidades locales están trabajando para rescatar los valores patrimoniales de este sitio y recuperar su importancia simbólica para la historia de la región y su población. En la mina de plata de Huantajaya se asentaron miles de personas de diferentes orígenes en condiciones extremadamente duras, las cuales crearon una parte esencial de la identidad cultural de Tarapacá, que fue la base de la industria del salitre en el siglo XIX que hizo famosa la región en el mundo. Hoy día el pueblo minero de Huantajaya ha desaparecido y sólo existen algunos restos arqueológicos, los piques de minas excavados en los cerros y la memoria de su pasado como una leyenda, junto con muchos archivos olvidados en España, Perú, Bolivia y Chile. A pesar de lo anterior, algunos de los habitantes locales quieren poner en valor este patrimonio y rescatar algunas de sus tradiciones para enriquecer su identidad cultural.

Palabras claves: Patrimonio Minero, Chile, Participación de las Comunidades, Plateros, Creencias Religiosas.



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**La Mine d'Argent Huantajaya à Tarapaca, Chili:
Conservation du Patrimoine.
La Route de L'argent dans le Centre Sud des Andes
et le Sauvetage d'Anciennes Identités Minières
et les Traditions de l'Artisanat d'Argent.**

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Résumé

Cet article présente la première étape d'un projet de recherche et d'intervention lié à l'ancienne mine d'argent préhispanique et coloniale située dans le désert de Tarapacá au Chili, et comment les communautés locales travaillent à sauver les valeurs patrimoniales de ce site et à retrouver une importance symbolique pour l'histoire de la région et de sa population. La mine d'argent de Huantajaya abritait des milliers de personnes d'origines différentes dans des conditions extrêmement difficiles, créant une partie essentielle de l'identité culturelle de Tarapacá, qui était à la base de l'industrie minière des salpêtres du XIXe siècle qui a rendu la région célèbre dans le monde. Aujourd'hui, le village minier de Huantajaya a disparu et il n'y a que quelques vestiges archéologiques, le brochet de mines creusées dans les collines et le souvenir de son passé de légende, ainsi que de nombreuses archives oubliées en Espagne, au Pérou, en Bolivie et au Chili. Malgré ce qui précède, certains habitants veulent valoriser ce patrimoine et sauver certaines de ses traditions pour enrichir son identité culturelle.

Mots-clés : Patrimoine minier, Chili, Participation des communautés, orfèvres, croyances religieuses.



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Die Huantajaya-Silbermine von Tarapaca, Chile: die Silber-Strecke in den Zentralen Südlichen Anden und die Rettung der Alten Bergbau-Identitäten und Traditionen von Handwerken in Silber.

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Zusammenfassung

Dieser Artikel beschreibt die erste Phase eines Forschungs- und Interventionsprojekts im Zusammenhang mit der alten prähispanischen und kolonialen Silbermine in der Wüste von Tarapacá, Chile, und wie die lokalen Gemeinden daran arbeiten, die Werte des Kulturerbes dieser Stätte zu retten und die symbolische Bedeutung wiederherzustellen für die Geschichte der Region und ihrer Bevölkerung. In der Silbermine von Huantajaya siedelten sich unter extrem schwierigen Bedingungen viele tausend Menschen unterschiedlicher Herkunft an, die einen wesentlichen Teil der kulturellen Identität von Tarapacá entwickelten, die die Grundlage für den Salz- oder Nitratabbau des 19. Jahrhunderts bildete, der die Region berühmt machte in der Welt. Heutzutage ist die Bergbaustadt verschwunden und es gibt nur noch einige archäologische Überreste, in den Hügeln ausgegrabene Minenschächte und die Erinnerungen an ihre Vergangenheit als Legende sowie viele in Spanien, Peru, Bolivien und Chile vergessene Archive. Trotzdem möchte ein Teil der lokalen Bevölkerung dieses Erbe wertschätzen und einige seiner Traditionen retten, um ihre kulturelle Identität zu bereichern.

Schlüsselwörter: Bergbauerbe; Chile; Beteiligung der Gemeinschaften; Silberhandwerker; Religiöse Überzeugungen.



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La Miniera d'Argento Huantajaya di Tarapacá, Cile: la Rotta dell'Argento nelle Ande Centrali Meridionali e il Salvataggio di Antiche Identità Minerarie e Tradizioni Artigianali in Argento.

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Astratto

Questo articolo presenta la prima fase di un progetto di ricerca e intervento relativo a Huantajaya, una vecchia miniera d'argento preispanica e coloniale situata nel deserto di Tarapacá, in Cile; e come le comunità locali stanno lavorando per salvare i valori del patrimonio di questo sito e recuperare la sua importanza simbolica per la storia della regione e della sua popolazione. Migliaia di persone di origini diverse si stabilirono nella miniera d'argento di Huantajaya in condizioni estremamente dure, che crearono una parte essenziale dell'identità culturale di Tarapacá, che era la base dell'industria dei nitrati nel 19 ° secolo che ha reso la regione famosa nel mondo. Oggi la città mineraria di Huantajaya è scomparsa e ci sono solo alcuni resti archeologici, i pozzi minerari scavati nelle colline e il ricordo del suo passato come una leggenda, insieme a molti archivi dimenticati in Spagna, Perù, Bolivia e Cile. Nonostante quanto sopra, alcuni degli abitanti locali vogliono valorizzare questo patrimonio e salvare alcune delle loro tradizioni per arricchire la loro identità culturale.

Parole chiave: Patrimonio Minerario; Cile; Partecipazione alla Comunità; Argentieri; Credenze Religiose.



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A Mina de Prata Huantajaya de Tarapacá, Chile: A Rota da Prata no Centro-Sul dos Andes e o Resgate de Identidades de Mineração Antigas e Tradições de Artesanato em Prata.

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Resumo

Este artigo apresenta a primeira etapa de um projeto de pesquisa e intervenção relacionado a Huantajaya, uma antiga mina de prata pré-hispânica e colonial localizada no Deserto de Tarapacá, Chile; e como as comunidades locais estão trabalhando para resgatar os valores patrimoniais deste local e recuperar sua importância simbólica para a história da região e sua população. Milhares de pessoas de diferentes origens se estabeleceram na mina de prata Huantajaya em condições extremamente adversas, que criaram uma parte essencial da identidade cultural de Tarapacá, que foi a base da indústria do nitrato no século 19 que tornou a região famosa no mundo. Hoje a cidade mineira de Huantajaya desapareceu e existem apenas alguns vestígios arqueológicos, os poços de mina escavados nas colinas e a memória de seu passado como uma lenda, junto com muitos arquivos esquecidos na Espanha, Peru, Bolívia e Chile. Apesar do exposto, alguns dos habitantes locais querem valorizar este patrimônio e resgatar algumas das suas tradições para enriquecer a sua identidade cultural.

Palavras-chave: Patrimônio Mineiro; Chile; Participação Comunitária; Ourives; Crenças Religiosas.



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Introduction

The territory of Tarapacá of northern Chile, from the Andes Mountains to the Pacific Ocean, is part of the Desert of Atacama, one of the driest deserts in the world. This region has a heritage treasure for its natural, cultural diversity and history of the different peoples that have inhabited it for millennia.

Due to its environmental characteristics and very dry conditions the desert retains traces of the archaeological record of that past that elsewhere disappear. However, such testimonies that nature preserves are destroyed by our own contemporary society, because of the ignorance and ambition involved in our actions in the environment and its material culture.

Learning from the past is the key to the future development of every society. The construction of each community future is more solid when it preserves its memory, understands its territory, goodness, fragility, and the diverse cultural identities of the people who live there. We all have an ethical responsibility for its conservation. It is our common heritage to share. It is our legacy with the history of successes and scars that we must preserve and understand.

The last 500 years of Tarapacá have been intense in historical and economic processes, which changed the way of life of communities that for hundreds of generations adapted to environmental characteristics of extreme aridity and height.



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The Tarapacá Desert is a part of the great Atacama Desert, one of the driest deserts of the world. The first indigenous settlers of Tarapacá managed to establish in the coastal desert gathering and fishing communities named by the archaeologists as the “Chinchorros”, who developed the first practices of artificial mummification 9,000 years ago and maintain their way of living for many thousands of years.

Other communities, some 2,000 years ago, founded agricultural villages in the valleys and their periphery, after a long period of gathering and experimenting to domesticate some local plants, and receiving some crops already domesticated in other territories by travelling peoples.

Through generations, this process organized an economic system that was able to harness and exchange the products of each ecological floor far away from East Andes, the tropical forests, to the high Andes in the altiplano, the narrow valleys in West Andes, to the desert lands, in the coast of Pacific Ocean.

Many of the different communities living in these diverse ecological territories sent small family colonies to settle extremely far away from its original villages, to assure products that they did not have in their own environments, creating long distance routes for commerce and an exchange of ideas and people. This specific cultural, social, religious, and economic process through generations was the main basis to create the first South Central Andes States in the highlands as Tiwanaku and then the Inka Empire, before the arrival of Spaniards in the XVI century (Murra, John 2004).

The Spanish conquest drastically changed this millennial process and imposed a new political, social, and economic order in the Andes as well as Tarapacá. The resources and peoples of the territories were exploited for the benefit of the few conquistadors and in favor of a mercantilist system and its power structures of the Spanish Colonial Empire.

At the beginning of the conquest, the territory of Tarapacá seemed not to have the riches of other places except its strategic importance in communications between Perú and Chile, and from the altiplano to the Pacific Ocean. However, the desert had its hidden treasure: the silver mine of Huantajaya near the seacoast of Tarapacá, that was known before the arrival of Spaniards and later exploited in different periods in colonial times.

The exploitation of silver allowed to create the first fortunes of Tarapacá, the intensive agriculture with new crops, assume the necessary risk for the transport of goods through the desert and high mountains and established various trades, such as silversmiths and others, which were developed in a number of places scattered throughout the region, such as San Lorenzo de Tarapacá , La Huayca, Pica, Matilla, Macaya, Quipisca, La Tirana, which at the time of XVIII and the beginning of XIX century created a silver route, and whose headboard was the silver mine of Huantajaya.

During the colonial times and the beginning of the XIX century, the exploitation of silver in Huantajaya in Tarapacá, was the axis of the regional economy and considered by the Spaniards as the Potosí of the Pacific, like Hrvoj Ostojic, a local historian of Iquique, has very well pointed out (Ostojic, Hrvoj 2019).

Figure2:
Drawing of the mining settlement of Huantajaya in 1807



(Ostojic, H. 2019)

But this history is unknown to major part of the population of Tarapacá today, although the silver mine was worked until the beginning of XX century, and whose history is recorded in old manuscripts, documents, photographs, and the material vestiges of this mining activity, that remain in place despite their partial surface destruction and vandalism.

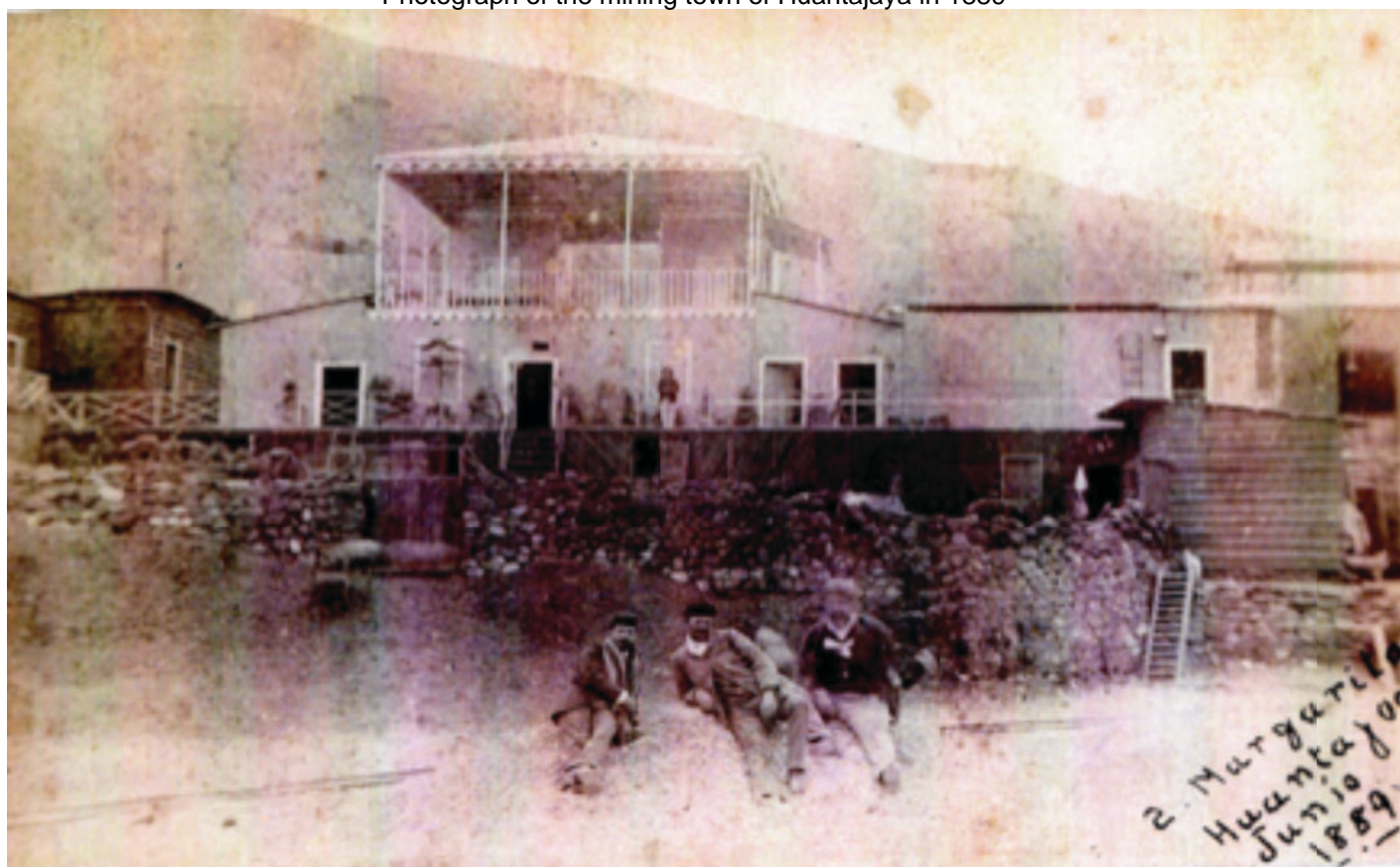
The main riches of Tarapacá in the Peruvian and Chilean republican time of XIX century were first the guano and later the saltpeter. Many thousand people arrived from Perú, Bolivia, Chile and around the world to work on these places. The population increased and the sea little town of Iquique was transformed in the most important seaport of Tarapacá.

The exploitation of the guano and the saltpeter left important heritage sites in the territory and memories because of their closeness to our time. This fast economic process changed the social organization and create new cultural traditions, mixing the old with the new.

Such richness also motivated the war between Perú, Bolivia and Chile in 1879, which Chile won annexing the territories of Antofagasta, Tarapacá y Arica, that belonged to Bolivia and Peru until then.

Figure3:

Photograph of the mining town of Huantajaya in 1889



(Ostojic, H. 2019)

Rescuing the silver mine and ruins of Huantajaya from oblivion is the great objective of the project we are working now. Several researchers proposed this challenge and worked for it by years, such as Horacio Larraín and Víctor Bugueño, community leaders such as Patricia Fuentes, Jorge Reyes and Patricia Briones, as well as institutions among which the municipality of Alto Hospicio – city in which boundaries is located the historic site-, the University of Tarapacá of Iquique, the newly created Foundation for Tourism Development and Heritage Conservation (CORDETUR) and the Regional Government of Tarapacá itself who are helping in this process.

Figure 4:
Huantajaya at present time.



Photo A. Cabeza



The Heritage Values of Huantajaya and the Route of Silver of Tarapacá

Huantajaya has a valuable archaeological, historical, geological, landscape, and intangible heritage that must be protected, preserved, and recognized as an especially important historical place of Tarapacá, and recently is in the process to be declared as a national monument. This place can be an important cultural, identity and tourist resource of Tarapacá, if the heritage site is well protected and managed by the local community. To do so we must collect all the scientific information about the site and the history of the silver in Tarapacá and in the Andes, remembering that the exploitation of the silver of Huantajaya moved the entire economy of the region in ancient times (Colleen Zori and Peter Tropper 2010). It is interesting to note that while the present city of Iquique was a town of just over a hundred inhabitants at the beginning of the XIX century, Huantajaya was a mining village that had between two and three thousand inhabitants working in the mines and services related to it.

Figure 5:

The place called “El Hundimiento” in the mine of Huantajaya.

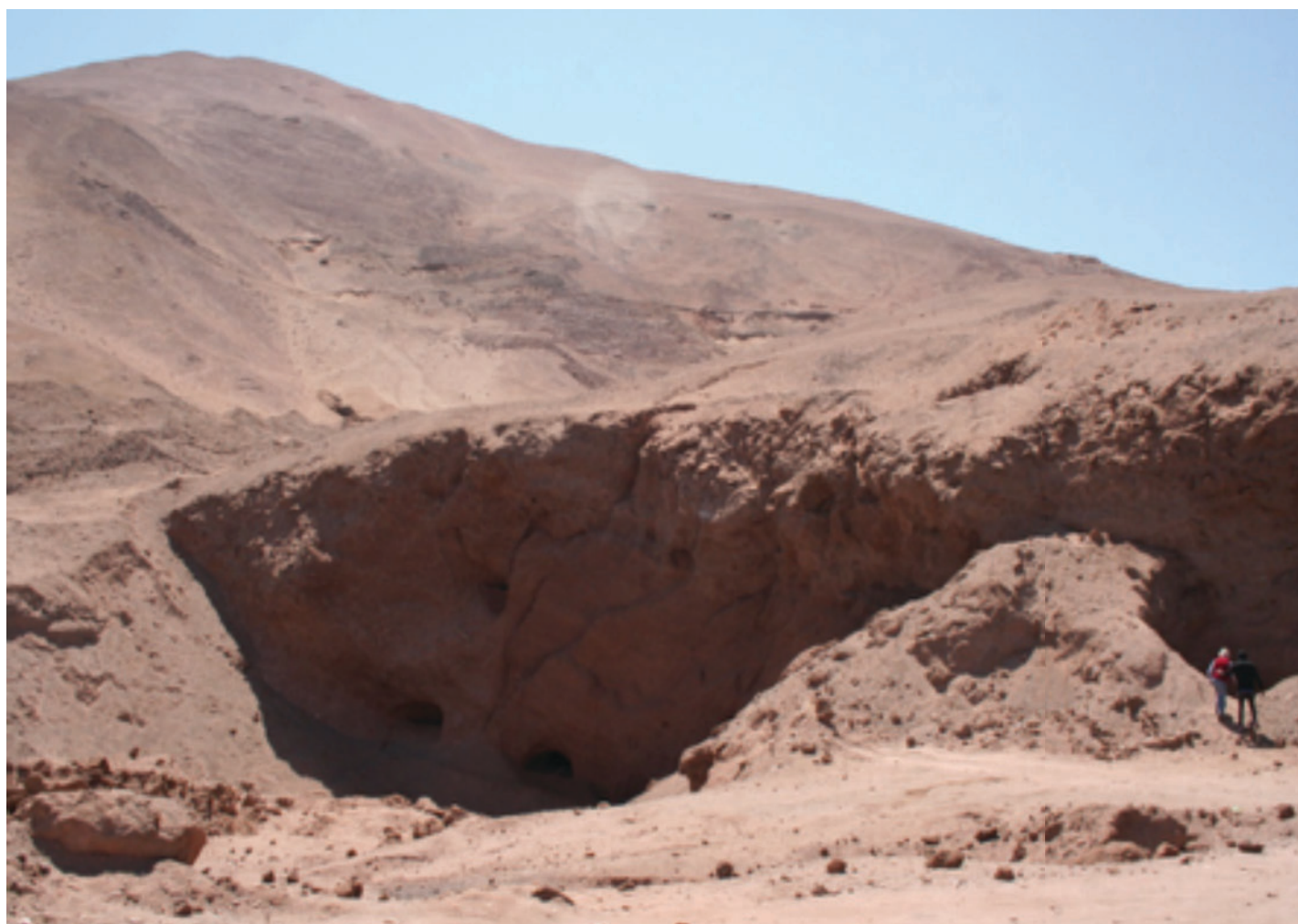


Photo A. Cabeza

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At the same time, Huantajaya was the key to the development of San Lorenzo de Tarapacá and Pica, the most important towns of Tarapacá. Because there were no water or wood in Huantajaya, the rocks with silver had to be transported to places in the Pampa del Tamarugal, like Carmen de la Tirana, Pozo Almonte, San Pablo de la Rinconada, Pozo del Rosario, Pozo de Guagama, and other locations in the valleys as Tilivilca, where silver was melted thanks to the small forests of tamarugos and the existence of water for the mining mills.

After this process, the silver bullions were exported in long journeys to Carangas, Potosí, Arica, and Lima, but some of the silver was smuggled to the seacoast to not pay the Spanish colonial taxes (Gavira, María Concepción 2005; Donoso, Carlos 2008; Mukerjee, Anil 2008).

The exploitation of silver in the desert of Tarapacá had its cycles of bonanzas and depletion. In the beginning, in the prehispanic time and the initial decades of Spanish colonial times, the rocks with a high concentration of silver were found near the surface and called by miners "papas".

Figure 6:

An entrance for the tunnels excavated by miners in Huantajaya.



Photo A. Cabeza

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But later, the miners did dig deep and extensive galleries of hundreds of meters, where they worked in extremely difficult conditions, most of them Indians, black and mulattos' slaves and mestizos (Hidalgo, Jorge 1985).

Chinese immigrants, in the middle of the XIX century, also worked as miners. But Huantajaya was not the only silver mine worked in Tarapacá and we must mention the other two places like Santa Rosa and Chanabaya, that were important mines in some periods.

We have forgotten, in the silver history of Tarapacá, the effort and hardship of thousands of men and women. We must remember them today. At the same time, we must recognize that this experience of exploration, work, technology, and adaptation to life in the desert, in colonial times, was especially important for the initial development of the exploitation of the saltpeter mining in the XIX century.

This last mining activity also created fortunes and moved people from different parts of the world to settle in the desert, whose specific history has been studied for many years by the regional historian Sergio González, through historic documents and life history of miners, who developed a special cultural identity and called themselves as "pampinos" (González, Sergio 2002).

Several Chilean and foreign researchers have rescued valuable documents that testify the past of the silver mines in the desert.

The list is long: Sergio Villalobos, Jorge Hidalgo, Carlos Donoso, Alberto Díaz, Luis Galdames, Pablo Guerrero, Anil Mukerjee, Colleen Zori, Peter Tropper and María Concepción Gavira, among others. However, much remains to be discovered in ancient archives of many countries. Nevertheless, the most urgent task is to protect Huantajaya and other places associated with its mining history, which are subject to the deterioration, serious threats of new activities that destroy its heritage, that we must face now.

The Project Huantajaya

The present project established three main lines of action: gathering and systematizing existing information on the Huantajaya heritage site and the history of the silver mining activity in the region; promote the valorization of the site, raising public awareness of the importance of its conservation and significance; and finally incorporate it creatively into the cultural sector, rescuing the trade of silverware and promoting Tarapacá tourism through a silver route that will connect

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Tarapacá with Oruro, Potosí and Sucre in Bolivia, and back to Arica in Chile, thus contributing to the integral development of the region and transferring key information to local communities to recover the material and intangible heritage.

Such lines of action include the preparation of a consolidated heritage report on the historical, archaeological, geological, environmental and economic values of Huantajaya; the elaboration of a plan of management and the creation of an institution that will administrate the historic site; the implementation of a pilot program for the formation of Tarapacá men and women silversmiths; to implement heritage workshops for teachers, students, guides and tour operators; elaboration of a proposal that identifies the main milestones and services associated with the silver route in Tarapacá; and finally, conduct a research seminar and a digital publication about Huantajaya and the silver of Tarapacá.

This project will last two years in its first stage, but already we have done some research and activities to promote awareness in public and local communities.

The Intangible Cultural Heritage at Service for the Communities

The mining town of Huantajaya was abandoned at the end of the XIX century and the beginning of XX century. Miners moved to Iquique and other towns, small farms in the valleys in the mountains, but most of them to work in the saltpeter industry in the desert.

But the people that worked in Huantajaya in the silver industrial activities for generations were always connected to the population of the region of Tarapacá.

Most of these people were involved in a social process that created a mixed culture of Indians, black people, and immigrants from different countries in the desert with its own cultural identity. Their knowledge in silver mining was particularly useful for the saltpeter industry in the XIX century.

During the colonial time and the first years of the republican time, the people working in this territory did mix traditions and beliefs, creating a new way of life and culture in the towns of the desert of Tarapacá, related to the silver, the saltpeter activities, and the places where they built water wells.

Figure 7:
Drawing of festival celebrations in Huantajaya in the XIX century.



(Ostojic, H. 2019)

So, through generations, the ancient Indian religion mixed with the Christian religion and old miner beliefs, creating new expressions in carnivals, festivals, music, meals, dances, ritual masks, and traditional clothes until today.

One of the places more famous that represent this mixed cultural and religious tradition is La Tirana, old water well in the middle of the desert, where silver carried from Huantajaya was produced. In this little town was built a sanctuary of the Virgin del Carmen that today is main religious meeting in Tarapacá and the Northern of Chile, where every year attends around 300.000 people each July 16.

The place is related to an old legend of an Indian princess who was in love with a Portuguese man in the time of Spanish Conquest and because of that, both were killed by Indians. The religious celebration of La Tirana mix old Indians traditions related to the “Pachamama” or the “Mother Land” with the catholic beliefs about the virgin (Núñez, Lautaro 2004).

Figure 8:
The religious celebration of La Tirana in Tarapacá.



Photo Paulo Lanás

The regional historians Paulo Lanás and Alberto Díaz are studying these first water wells in the desert, as places where the people that did work in the silver and saltpeter mines, visited frequently and had social relations with the rest of population of the region, which made possible to create this cultural identity of the desert of Tarapacá, where the syncretism, revitalization and mix of old and new ideas are present until now in the beliefs and traditions of the people.

Recent field research by the author of this article in the site of Huantajaya raises new questions related to this complex process of religious syncretism.

As we have said above, in the first years of the Spanish conquest of Tarapacá the Spaniards received information about the existence near the coast of the “Mina del Sol de Tarapacá” that was worked by the Incas, so discovering the mine of Huantajaya.

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Figure 9:
A parade of traditional brotherhood in Iquique.



Photo A. Cabeza

In 1976 was discovered by accident near the top of the Huantaca hill, close to Huantajaya, the burial of two Andean maidens from Inca's time. All the traits and the place point out that this was a part of the ritual sacrifice called "Capacocha". Why this ceremony was carried out in this place? And what for?

Throughout the Andes, the hills and mountains are sacred and a central part of the religious beliefs of the peoples who have inhabited them from the past to the present. This ideological system cannot be understood without the sun, the moon, the stars, the ocean, the springs and rivers, whose waters give fertility to the land.

The integration of all these factors explains the origin of the Indian peoples of the Andes. This ideology that binds human beings with nature has maintained certain rituals and incorporated others over time due to the processes of conquest, colonization, and religious syncretism for five centuries.

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However, the meaning and rituals celebrated in many places have been lost, although some communities, which have this ancient spiritual substrate, have recreated a new account in such places and others under the catholic church.

Studying the position of the sun over the hills of Huantajaya and Huantaca, we discovered that the sun, in the sunset of the winter solstice, is locating in the top of Huantajaya hill and then to the top of Huantaca hill.

The first one is the highest point of the silver mine, the second one is the highest point to watch the Pacific Ocean, the route to reach the seashore of Iquique and the place where a ceremonial place from Inca times was found.

These facts for the ritual and religious significance of both hills are amazing. Moreover, we observed last December that the full moon appeared in the top of Huantaca hill looking from the seashore of Iquique.

Figure 10:
Winter solstice sunset with the sun over the summit
of hill San Agustín de Huantajaya.



Photo A. Cabeza

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Figure 11:

Rising sun in winter solstice and rising full moon
over the Huantaca hill from Iquique city.



Photo A. Cabeza

We must remember that for the Andean and Inca peoples the silver and the ocean were related to female gender and the two girls sacrificed in the top of that hill should be relate to such religious beliefs. These facts must be studied and explained very well and give back this knowledge to the local communities to help their process of recovering old traditions for revitalizing their cultural identity.

Conclusion

Some generations can forget and lose part of their intangible heritage, but the basic relations sometimes are in the field and with the help of the communities we can read it again and give it back to the people so they can create new interpretations of their past and present. One example of this process is the work of the heritage volunteers of the city Alto Hospicio who reestablished the custom to visit the forgotten cemeteries of Huantajaya and put in the graves metal flowers made by them. They are the future of the site and will make more people interested in the conservation of this heritage.

By another hand, the project Huantajaya has two strong ideas that can contribute to regional development and the cultural identity of Tarapacá within the Andean area. The first is to establish a silver route in Tarapacá creating new cultural, social, economic, and tourist links with Bolivia and Perú.

The other idea is to recover the knowledge of the ancient silversmith traditions almost forgotten in Tarapacá. We must rescue this artisanal practice for the young people, so they can produce silver objects with old and new designs inspired in ancient traditions, giving the local people economic benefits, so they can feel prouder of their culture. In this way, many people and authorities will understand that put in value the heritage is especially useful.

The project Huantajaya has certainly ambitious goals, especially in the context that Chile and the region of Tarapacá have now with the pandemic and political problems, but not impossible to achieve, if the necessary wills work together. Tarapacá is a territory that keeps an immense and diverse heritage, located in quite different and extreme environments.

Figure 12:
The local community annual visit to the old cemetery of Huantajaya
giving color metal flowers to each grave.



Photo A. Cabeza

Some of this heritage has been recognized as a World Heritage Site of UNESCO, like the Salpeter Works of Humberstone and Santa Laura, but there are many more places with the tangible and intangible heritage of equal importance, that we must rescue for the cultural identity and development of Tarapacá and its people. The ancient silver mine of Huantajaya is one of them.

Figure 13:
Graves with metal color flowers in desert cemeteries of Tarapacá.



Photo A. Cabeza

Figure 14:
Silver objects from republican time made by Aymaras communities.



Photo courtesy Museo San Miguel de Azapa, Universidad de Tarapacá.

Figure 15:

Ear ornaments from an archaeological site dated 200 years BC in the Valley of Azapa, Arica, Chile.



Photo courtesy Museo San Miguel de Azapa, Universidad de Tarapacá.

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Figure 16:
Baton of Aymara Indian chief.



Photo courtesy Museo San Miguel de Azapa, Universidad de Tarapacá.

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